

PhotoFile

A MINI-MAGAZINE FEATURING PHOTOGRAPHY AND ARTICLES BY
John R. DeLapp

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Redpoll Rally

*Photographs and experiences with
a flock of redpolls wintering in
Anchorage, Alaska*



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Cover Photo:
Male common redpoll sitting on a post on the deck of John DeLapp's house in Anchorage, Alaska.

PhotoFile #2 - Redpoll Rally

The inaugural issue of PhotoFile was published in October 2012 and as I stated in that issue (and this issue), subsequent publications of this mini-magazine would be issued on an irregular basis. Well, I guess having the second issue published five months after the first qualifies as "irregular"! Various distractions including setting up a new computer with the latest programs, and my general demeanor during the depths of winter which sometimes borders on hibernation, has de-railed the second issue until now. But the appearance of a large flock of common redpolls at our house in late January and early February along with the lengthening days, has inspired me to write about these small, energetic, and incredibly handsome birds. I spent many hours watching their antics around our two feeders and obtained a number of memorable images in the process. The intent with this issue is to share these images as well as some of my observations, photo techniques, and fact findings about these interesting little birds.

I originally had another idea in mind for PhotoFile # 2, but I put that on hold and decided to devote this issue to the redpolls given that their presence has given me such a great opportunity to observe and photograph them over a period of several weeks.

Looking ahead, what do you suppose will be the topic for PhotoFile #3? Well, you'll just have to wait as see, as you now know, this mini-magazine is published on an irregular and rather intermittent basis. Who knows when the next publishing date will be or what the subject (or subjects) will turn out to be. Stay tuned.

Other Publications by John R. DeLapp

Mini-magazines (available for purchase from www.magcloud.com)

PhotoFile #1: *Chinitna Bay Bear Camp*, October, 2012.

Books (available for preview or purchase from: www.Blurb.com)

Rock, Rock Art, and Ruins. Black and white photographs of travels in the southwest U.S. April 2012.

Road Trip, Colorado to Alaska, May 2011. Photographs and notes from my solo road trip from Grand Junction, Colorado to Anchorage in the spring of 2011.

Norah, With Her Family in Connecticut. Photographs and commentary celebrating the birth of my granddaughter. April, 2011.

Stories from My Early Years, by Warren DeLapp and John R. DeLapp. Stories and photographs of Warren DeLapp's early years with additional biographical notes about his later achievements and life. December, 2008.

Animals, A Portfolio of Photography. A presentation of my favorite wildlife photographs. November, 2007.

People, A Retrospective of Photography: 1968-2007. October, 2007.

Others

Sam and His Earliest Moments. Photos and notes commemorating the birth of my grandson. October, 2006. (www.lulu.com)

Reaching, The Story of a Young Minnesota Girl and Her Dream to Fly, by Mary DeLapp. Published 2005 by John and Tina DeLapp (out of print).



Redpoll Rally

There has been an explosion of redpolls showing up this winter around our place in south Anchorage. I thought, “Wow, it looks like a redpoll rally!”

Not seen earlier in the winter, they began showing up late January and early February and flocks of twenty or thirty have been consistently hanging around our bird feeders. This seems unusual since we saw almost no redpolls last winter with just a few individuals appearing in late winter. Other people have also reported large numbers of redpolls this winter.

Until this redpoll flock arrived, we had a winter with the normal feathered customers, including black-capped chickadees, red-breasted nuthatches, and an occasional pine siskin, chestnut-backed chickadee, Steller’s jay, three-toed woodpecker, magpie, and dark-eyed junco. The invasion of the redpolls was a pleasant surprise and they have been entertaining to watch but a bit of a challenge to photograph, since like most small birds, they rarely sit still.

Their appearance inspired me to do a little research to find out more about these handsome but quirky little birds. Redpolls are lively little guys, by my observations, slightly smaller than chickadees, and have to be tough to survive our winters. They are members of the finch family and breed in the north, including Alaska and northern Canada. There are actually two types, the common redpoll and the hoary redpoll, that are almost identical and difficult to distinguish.

They prefer subarctic climates and are typically associated with birch trees, although they don’t normally inhabit dense forests. Sibley’s *Field Guide to Birds of Western North America* describes the common redpoll as “common but nomadic and their numbers vary from year to year”, apparently due to the variation in the natural production of seeds, their main diet. That seems to be consistent with my own observations at our location over the years.

Redpolls primarily feed on birch seeds and catkins, the seeds of willow, alder, spruces, as well as wildflowers, berries, and insects in summer months.

Like all finches, redpolls have a short, stout conical shaped bill for cracking and eating seeds.

Although redpolls may migrate, they have adapted to survive in the cold northern winters and reportedly will burrow under the snow to keep warm. I did not observe this activity and wondered where they spend their nights. At first light in the morning, they would show up at our feeder so I assume they spent the night close by.

Records of their migration indicate erratic patterns, sometimes migrating as far as California to avoid storms. Banded birds from North America have also been found in Norway and Siberia. Some birds winter as far south as the U.S. upper mid-west and New England states, and at least this past winter, a number have stayed in portions of Alaska.

Around our feeder the redpolls seem to exhibit a pecking order. Some individuals show aggression and lunge with open beaks at others



who try to land nearby to feed. Others are quite happy to have a companion or two next to them while they feed. They were so numerous at times that the resident chickadees, who act very politely around the feeder, found it hard to get in for the sunflower chip banquet provided by the DeLapp household.







I noticed the redpolls kept a close eye toward the skies and would explode in a mass exodus into the cover of a spruce tree when they saw a larger bird such as a raven or magpie cruise by overhead. Once, when a Steller's jay flew in to take a look at the feeder, the redpolls scurried back into the safety of thick spruce boughs until the jay left.

Having a feeder close to a window helped in getting some close-up shots of these little birds. A number of the photos were taken through a window by placing the lens hood directly on the glass. This eliminated the possibility of reflections from the glass but did not eliminate the problem of shooting through two panes of insulated glass which, undoubtedly, degraded the image somewhat. I was able to open a window or door at times and get some images in that manner.

Most of the images were made on cloudy days which provided beautiful, even light for portraits of the birds but meant that the light levels were low. This required shooting at relatively high ISOs, in the range of 800 to 1600. It didn't help that the birds were often partially under the







canopy of spruce trees which reduced the available light even further. I found that I got the best results by using flash-fill with the flash set at an exposure compensation of about $-\frac{1}{2}$ to -1 . The methodology in using the flash was to set my exposure for the ambient (background) light first, while ensuring that the shutter speed was not more than $1/200$ sec, which is the maximum sync speed for my cameras.

Next, I adjusted the flash to get a natural looking image that provided the right amount of frontal light and a catch light in the eye. The catch light really makes the birds “come alive” and is worth the extra effort to get it just right. Although my flash has a high speed sync setting, I usually try to avoid using this setting since it reduces the power of the flash, and besides, I often forget to turn this setting ON when the shutter speed is above $1/200$ second so I end up with a bad exposure.

My biggest challenge was finding birds with a clean, uncluttered background who would be stationary long enough for me to compose and focus on their eye. Given the jerky little movements that these birds continually make with their heads, it was a continual problem to get their eye in focus. I quick-

ly discovered that they used the same perches over and over as they waited for their turn at the feeder, so my strategy was to pre-focus the camera on that spot and wait for a bird to land there. This allowed me to compose, focus, and shoot quickly. I got lots of practice moving the focus point around in the frame while composing the picture. I also tried to get some flight shots, but discovered that this was very difficult, essentially an act of futility with these little birds!

It turned out to be a fun mid-winter project and gave me a good opportunity to improve my camera technique with fast moving subjects, plus I ended up adding some pleasing images of redpolls to my collection of bird photos.

Equipment used to make these images consisted of the Canon 5DII, Canon 7D, Canon 300 f/2.8 II, with and without the EF 1.4x III extender, and a Canon Speedlite 580EX II.

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Common Redpolls Photographed in Anchorage, Alaska
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